WHERE IS GOD IN THIS MESS?
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Luke 1:26–38
Matthew 1:1–16 (excerpts)

"Mary said to the angel,
'How can this be . . .?'"
Luke 1:34 (NRSV)

She struck the angel as hardly old enough
to have a child at all, let alone this child.
He told her what the child was to be named
and who he was to be and something about
the mystery that was to come upon her.
"You mustn't be afraid, Mary," he said.
As he said it, he only hoped she wouldn't notice
that beneath the great, golden wings
he himself was trembling with fear
to think that the whole future of creation
hung now on the answer of a girl.

Frederick Buechner
Peculiar Treasures

As you came to a poor young woman, startling her
with unlikely, improbable news, so, O God, startle us
this morning with news of your coming into history,
into our lives, with love and reconciliation and renewal.
Help us, O God, to hear it all again,
as if for the first time. Amen.

One of my favorite Christmas memories is of the day long ago when, attempting to counter all the commercial hullabaloo about Santa, I sat down at the kitchen table with one of my youngsters in the middle of December and undertook the project of assembling a cardboard cutout crèche: stable, manger, baby Jesus, Mary and Joseph, sheep, cows, shepherds, and the wise men—"fold on dotted line, place tab A in slot B." It was a disaster; nothing worked the way it was supposed to. The kitchen table was littered with torn, bent, useless figures. Apart from Scotch tape this was not going to work. Surveying the disastrous scene on the kitchen table, the four-year-old who

was my partner and to whom we were trying to explain the real meaning of Christmas—that Jesus is God's Son—said, "So Daddy, where is God in this mess?"

It is not only one of my favorite Christmas memories, it remains the quintessential Christmas question: "Where exactly is God in this mess?" I suspect everyone asks that about this time. It was posed this week by an executive faced with the necessity of telling devoted, dedicated, longtime employees who had become respected colleagues and friends that their jobs had been eliminated. "Where," she said one of them had asked her, "is God in all of this disruption and uncertainty and tragedy?"

The claim, of course, is that God is right there in the middle of the mess: the mess of a long journey when you are nine months' pregnant, the mess of no place to stay for the night, the mess of giving birth in a stable, the mess of a census, the mess of a political situation so fragile that any hint of a threat to the current authorities and power brokers was seen as a warrant to kill all the babies just in case, which is what King Herod did when he heard about the birth in Bethlehem. The Christian claim is that the holy, omnipotent, omniscient creator of the universe chose to assume the limitations of human life, to enter human history in, of all things, the birth of a baby. The theologians call it the "Scandal of Particularity." It is a scandal. We prefer God off in the sky, on a throne, watching life on earth, or God as an elegant philosophic abstraction, the ground of being, the first cause, the primal mover. But a baby? God coming among us in a human birth and a human life and a human death? Where is God in this mess?

The central character is the one who conceived, carried, and bore him, Mary of Nazareth. The Gospels of Luke and Matthew introduce her very differently. The favorite is Luke's story. Gabriel, an angel of the Lord, appears to a young woman who is engaged to a man by the name of Joseph and tells her she will bear a child, but it's not Joseph's exactly, because they are not yet married. "Do not be afraid," the angel tells Mary, which, of course, she is. It is a great moment, and artists have created incredibly rich and beautiful paintings of it. The Italian Renaissance artists were fascinated by the annunciation and painted it in gorgeous pastels: Mary is demure, holding a flower or reading a book, the angel's wings shimmering, gold, red, blue. One of my modern favorites is an etching on two glass panels, Mary and Elizabeth, in stick figures, the angel, a shaft of light descending on each. And my favorite literary characterization is by Frederick Buechner:

> She struck the angel as hardly old enough to have a child at all, let alone this child. He told her what the child was to be named and who he was to be and something about the mystery that was to come upon her. "You mustn't be afraid, Mary," he said. As he said it, he only hoped she wouldn't notice that beneath the great, golden wings he himself was

> trembling with fear to think that the whole future of creation hung now on the answer of a girl. (From "Gabriel," *Peculiar Treasures)*

Mary apparently has a decision to make, and she makes it. "Here I am, the servant of the Lord: let it be to me according to your word."

Matthew, on the other hand, introduces Mary peculiarly, with a genealogy. No better way to kill a good story, someone noted (Borg and Crossan, *The First Christmas*), than with a long list of ancestors. But that is how Matthew does it:

> An account of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham.
>
> Abraham was the father of Isaac, and Isaac the father of Jacob, . . .

On and on through fourteen generations up to Jesse, the father of King David.

Then another fourteen generations: David the father of Solomon up to the Babylonian Exile.

Then another fourteen generations: Jechoniah, Zerubbabel, Eleazar, Matthan the father of Jacob, and Jacob the father of Joseph the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born, who is called the Messiah.

All the people in this list, this family tree, from Abraham right up to Joseph, are men, except for four women: Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and the wife of Uriah —five counting Mary.

The next thing Matthew tells us is that Mary and Joseph have not had intimate relations, so all this male family connection doesn't really matter because Joseph wasn't really Jesus' father.

So why does Matthew go through all these names of male ancestors? Might it have something to do with the four women's names in the list: Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and Bathsheba, whom Matthew simply identifies as "the wife of Uriah"? That would be the Uriah King David arranged to have killed because Uriah's wife, Bathsheba, was carrying David's child.

Princeton scholar Katherine Sakenfeld says that "Matthew places Mary in an astonishing company of women" (*Blessed One*, p. 21). All four are foreigners, outsiders. Their stories are fascinating and very messy.

Tamar has an affair with her to-be-father-in-law, Judah. She places herself where he can't miss her. He initiates. The result is twins, one of whom, Perez, is an ancestor of David.

Rahab is part of a great soap opera of a story. Rahab runs a brothel in Jericho. As the invading Israelites approach—before the battle of Jericho when the "walls came tumblin' down"—Joshua sends two spies into the city to reconnoiter. They end up at Rahab's place (for what reason we are left to imagine). The King of Jericho finds out, sends his men to investigate. Rahab lies, hides the Israelite spies under a pile of leaves on the roof, and the next night she helps them escape by a rope from her upstairs window. She leaves a scarlet ribbon in the window, and the invading Israelites recognize it, and her house and its inhabitants are saved. That's really messy!

Ruth is a Moabite, whose husband and father-in-law die, and she follows her mother-in-law, Naomi, back to Naomi's homeland of Judah : "Your people shall be my people." At Naomi's urging, Ruth sneaks up on a rich farmer, Boaz, in the middle of the night as he's sleeping. Outrageous, shameful, scandalous behavior in Israel. The result: Obed is King David's grandfather.

Bathsheba, wife of Uriah, is the one King David sees bathing and sends for her. The result is a pregnancy and the arranged murder of her husband, then marriage, the death of the newborn, and David's shame. It doesn't get any messier than that.

And Mary. Astonishing company indeed.

William Placher, a distinguished Presbyterian theologian who taught at Wabash College and was a good friend of this church and its staff, diedunexpectedly last month. One of his last books was *Jesus the Savior,* in which he observes, "In a world convinced that, with rare exceptions, men made history, not women—and certainly not such an odd collection of women as these, who violate all sorts of social norms of respectability—the stories tell us that these very women are part of the way God was at work to bring about the incarnation" (p. 53).

What these women have in common with Mary, Katherine Sakenfeld observes, is that "the four stories—and Mary—show God at work in situations that challenge ordinary human expectations and values."

Protestants aren't sure what to think about Mary. Our Roman Catholic friends call her Queen of Heaven, Mother of God, whose virginity was perpetual and whose own conception was "immaculate." Protestants simply unpack her from the Christmas box, place her in the stable beside the

manger for a few weeks, and then wrap her up and repack her and ignore her until next year.

Happily we are rediscovering Mary and reclaiming her centrality to the Christian story. We would add to the traditions that surround Mary the importance of her ordinariness: a young woman in a man's world; a young woman, unmarried and pregnant, in a world that held her guilty and could impose a death sentence by stoning for violating her engagement vows to Joseph; a poor, young, unmarried, pregnant woman.

That's who God chose to bear God's Son: to nurse him and nurture him and raise him and love the Son of God.

That's why Matthew puts her in such strange company, with four other women who "don't fit" with society's expectations and morals, five women who become themselves in unique ways, say yes to God, and become part of God's drama of salvation.

Jesus is going to "change the rules," Bill Placher wrote. "He's a king born in a stable. He is God made flesh, but his birth occasioned scandal and violence. . . . It is an embarrassed woman, some strange foreigners, and some disreputable shepherds who seem to be those with whom and through whom God is working in the birth of this human being who is also God" (p. 57).

What to make of all this? You might begin by watching and waiting and expecting God to show up in the middle of whatever mess the life of the world and your life is.

Be open, Mary's story says. Enter what the philosopher Paul Ricœur called a "second naïveté." Become like children, wide-eyed with wonder, willing to believe. Open yourself to the unexpected and improbable and unimaginable. God comes, God appears, God works and heals and reconciles through the likes and lives of ordinary people — people like you and me.

Mary's improbable story is an invitation never to give up the dream and hope of a warring world at peace and never to give up the dream of a divided society at one; never to give up the dream of excluded, discriminated-against, marginalized people embraced and affirmed and welcomed and included and all barriers of race, social class, gender, and, yes, sexual orientation gone, welcomed to human society as they are, ordained in the church, in leadership positions throughout society, free to enjoy all the benefits and rights of society. Mary, outsider, marginalized, is an invitation never to give up the dream of every child of God welcomed, loved, celebrated. Mary's story is an invitation to you never to give up the dream and hope and expectation of your own broken life healed and whole.

Mary's story is a reminder that God is in the mess, this life, with you and me, in this world, this beautiful, amazing world now made holy because Mary birthed her child into it. That is an idea so simple and yet profound that sometimes we need a poet to say it for us. So Wendell Berry, going about his chores on his small farm in Kentucky on Christmas Eve, wrote,

> Remembering that it happened once,
> We cannot turn away the thought,
> As we go out, cold, to our barns
> Toward the long night's end, that we
> Ourselves are living in the world
> It happened in when it first happened,
> That we ourselves, opening a stall
> (A latch thrown open countless times
> Before), might find them breathing there,
> Foreknown: the Child bedded in straw,
> The mother kneeling over Him,
>
> The husband standing in belief
> He scarcely can believe, in light
> That lights them from no source we see. . . .
>
> We stand with one hand on the door,
> Looking into another world
> That is this world, the pale daylight
> Coming just as before, our chores
> To do, the cattle all awake,
> Our own white frozen breath hanging
> In front of us; and we are here
> As we have never been before,
> Sighted as not before, our place
> Holy, although we knew it not.
> (*A Timbered Choir: The Sabbath Poems 1979–1997*)

It is, finally, to trust: in the middle of the mess that is our life in the world, the joys and sorrows, the hopes and fears, the successes and defeats, gains and losses, birth and death, to trust, to trust deeply the giver of it all, the God who came in the birth of a baby in Bethlehem.

Our dear colleague and pastor and friend, Dana Ferguson, who died two months ago, offered the prayer in our Christmas Eve candlelight service last year. Dana prayed,

> The cry of a baby in the night signals to us hope and salvation for all the world. We who have sat in darkness, in the shadow of death, on us light

> has shined. So make this place no longer what it was, Shepherd of the world's people. Give us grace to live in health of body and health of mind. When health fails, give us grace to serve each other; give us grace to live in love. And when death comes, give us grace to comfort each other in the promise of life and give us grace to know an interval of laughter in all our waiting.

It is to trust the God who came in the birth of the baby of Bethlehem, wholly, utterly.

"How can this be?" Mary asked.

And Mary gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth and laid him in a manger.

Amen.